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## 'BEYOND VALLEY OF DOLLS'

# Critic's Film-Making Itch

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CHICAGO—Just a year ago we were studying the cable from Richard Zanuck. It was about four feet long and came from somewhere in Europe, where Richard was traveling with his father, Darryl. The cable apparently said that Richard (the studio chief) and Darryl (board chairman) approved of the first draft of "Beyond the Valley of the Dolls."

Apparently, there were a few sentences, rather cautiously worded, that suggested maybe we should eliminate the scene where the movie mogul chases the starlet around his office. The Zanucks thought that had been done too often before (the scene, not the chase). And there was a stern paragraph cautioning that the movie must qualify for an R rating; no X-rated film had ever issued from 20th Century-Fox.

But, generally speaking, the Zanucks seemed to give the first-draft their blessing. And so we went back to work and produced a second draft and then revised that a couple of times. By Oct. 1 the screenplay for "BVD" was finished, setting some kind of record at Fox: six weeks flat from original story to final draft.

### Back to Chicago

And then I returned to Chicago. A few weeks earlier, I'd been a stainless young critic, pure as the driven snow, a frequent speaker at church suppers. Now I was the author of a big-budget skin flick about to be directed by the king of the nudies, Russ Meyer. Friends said I looked much the same. Now I've got a year's distance on that experience. "Beyond the Valley of the Dolls," which once consisted of barely legible notes on yellow legal pads, actually became a movie during the year, was released, reviewed, seen by a lot of people and made it to the top of the Variety box-office chart.

My opinion of the movie? No comment.

When a critic involves himself in the making of a movie, I believe he should disqualify himself from reviewing it later. How can he possibly be objective, in either praise or blame?

He's got to let it venture out into the world without program notes or hallelujah from his corner and let the other critics say what they will about it.

During the six weeks I was living at the Sunset Marquis in Los Angeles I sometimes felt as if I'd wandered into one of Raymond Chandler's novels.

### Legendary Place

The Sunset Marquis is a semi-legendary place near Sunset Strip and just down the hill from the Playboy Club. A lot of actors, writers, agents, etc., live there, sitting around the pool and waiting for calls. A novel ought to be written about the place. Tiny Tim used to live there. Always kept his door locked, rented a separate suite for Miss Vicki (next door) and Van Heffin still does. Also Jackie Gale, David Steinberg, Allan Sherman and a lot of people who hope to be famous, tomorrow at the latest.

There was a genuine democracy at the Sunset Marquis, based on the rock-bottom belief that if you were working at least you had a job. It didn't matter that I was writing a skin flick for the king of the nudies: Abe Polonsky, who was directing "Tell Them Willie Boy Was Here," talked to me all the same: "at least you're working, kid." Polonsky was a victim of the 1950s blacklist and knew what he was talking about.

Every 10 minutes or so the poolside phone would ring and Jackie Gale would go off to talk to his agent, coming back with news of bookings in Vegas, London, places that somehow lost their reality as you sat in the sun, gazing up at Hugh Hefner's penthouse in the high-rise Playboy Club on the hill. Occasionally there would be a flurry of discussion among the sunbathers: should we order from the Colonel or go the Chinks?

### Studio Hierarchy

Hollywood operates on clout and status and it doesn't take long to grasp the studio hierarchy. All the producers and directors have their own parking spaces in a lot across from the main building, for example. But Richard Zanuck has a space right in front of the door and so does Darryl, and his space is never occupied by anybody else's car, even though he hasn't been west in years. Works out of the New York office.

In the commissary, there's a large room where most people eat: the secretaries, extras, supporting actors, crew members, etc. Then there's an "executive dining room" where the producers, directors and big stars eat. Because this is Hollywood, the executive dining room isn't closed off from the big room. It's open, so everybody can look in and see who's important today.

On the wall opposite the executive dining room, there's a huge mural depicting the greatness of Hollywood. The only recognizable likeness among the many pictures is an enormous portrait of Darryl F. Zanuck. He is not in the center of the mural, but toward one end, so that he looks directly across the commissary and into the executive dining room. So as the little people look in at the big people, the big people occasionally look out and see Zanuck's level stare. Neither Zanuck, of course,

ever eats in the executive dining room.

The first day he dined in the executive dining room, Russ Meyer told me he never seriously expected to be hired by Fox to do a big-budget picture. He was so relaxed, in fact, that he dozed off in an outer office while waiting to be interviewed by Richard Zanuck.

When he found that he was actually being asked to come onto the lot as a producer-director, after 10 years of the low-budget films he made himself, dragging the camera up the hill on his back, he had a curious reaction:

### Like Crazy

"I was driving a red Jeep," he said, "and I drove out of the lot straight down the middle of the 12th St. set for Hello, Dolly! and I was laughing like crazy!"

A lot of people have asked why I agreed to work for Meyer on a movie with a name like "Beyond the Valley of the Dolls." I wanted to do it because I consider Meyer to be a talented filmmaker who is only now getting the opportunity to direct with an adequate budget and because (to be honest) of the money.

No, I didn't get a percentage. I worked for a flat fee and invested it all in stocks, which promptly went down about two-thirds in value.

So I guess you'd have to say I value the experience most. There are things about move-making you just can't learn from books or from looking at movies; you have to dive in and find them out for yourself.

I didn't much like the idea of being the author of

an X-rated movie. We tried for the R rating but didn't make it. I don't consider myself a specialist in X films and in fact the screenplay I'm writing now will probably be rated G. I find it a little strange that people write me letters asking why I praise "dirty movies" all the time. In fact, the only skin flick I've ever given a good review to was Meyer's "Vixen," because it deserved it. I'd give Disney four stars if they'd only make a four-star movie.

Somebody, I think it was Buddy Hackett, once said Hollywood was a place where you go as a young man and work hard until you own your own pool. Then one afternoon you

doze off beside the pool and when you awake up you're 70 years old and it's getting cold.

The six weeks in Hollywood were some of the most interesting in my life and I'd like to write more movies. But I don't think I could ever live in Los Angeles permanently.

About a week after I got back, I attended a benefit at the Playboy mansion. I ran into Hefner in a corner and told him I'd lived half a block down the hill from his penthouse.

"Sometimes," I said, "we'd sit around the pool and look up at your penthouse."

"Is that right?" Hefner said and smiled. "Sometimes I'd sit up there and look down at your pool."